

# Finding Friends in Pennsylvania

If architecture reflects a society's culture, the design of houses of worship may offer an insight into its soul. For more than 300 years, the Religious Society of Friends, known also as Quakers, have practiced their religion in simple meetinghouses, structures that reflect an aesthetic often referred to as "Quaker Plain Style."

Nestled in communities throughout the Delaware Valley, more than 150 meetinghouses dating from as early as 1695 still stand. A multi-year project to research and document this regionally, and in some cases nationally, significant building type has produced a substantial body of knowledge adding to the scholarship on Friends meetinghouses. The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) of the National Park Service and is on public exhibition at The Athenaeum of Philadelphia through the end of 2002.

The exhibition, "Silent Witness: Quaker Meetinghouses in the Delaware Valley, 1695 to the Present," is sponsored by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting<sup>1</sup> of the Religious Society of Friends, HABS, the Quaker Information Center, and The Philadelphia Athenaeum to raise awareness of the richness of the architectural heritage of the Friends in the Delaware Valley. From The

Athenaeum, the exhibit will go to the Arch Street Meetinghouse<sup>2</sup> in Philadelphia where it will be open to the public from February through May 2003. This will coincide with the spring session of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting when Friends from the region gather for annual business meetings.

The documentation project was funded through a Congressional appropriation secured by then-U.S. Representative Peter Kostmeyer of Pennsylvania. Looking broadly at the meetinghouses in southeastern Pennsylvania, HABS comprehensively examined and selectively recorded a large sampling of structures. These written histories, measured drawings, and large-format photographs constitute a lasting, publicly accessible record.<sup>3</sup>

## ***Tangible History***

The Friends Meetinghouses of the Delaware Valley are important historic resources — tangible reminders of the contributions of Friends to the history of the region, starting with the founding of the Pennsylvania colony by a Quaker, William Penn, on the principle of religious toleration for all. Penn's "Charter of Privileges" offered colonists guarantees of civic, as well religious, freedom. This document later became the basis for America's Bill of Rights. Friends are also responsible for myriad landmark institutions of social reform in Philadelphia advocating humane treatment for the insane, the imprisoned, and the unempowered, including Native Americans, slaves, and the poor.

Included among the meetinghouses are many well-preserved colonial-era examples, which provide important venues for studying the area's early vernacular architecture (see Figure 1). Taken as a group, the meetinghouses survive as physical manifestations of the changing expressions of Quaker faith and practice. The number of structures and the changes they represent over more than 300 years of association with Philadelphia Yearly Meeting present an unparalleled opportunity to document the evolution of an important American building type.

*Figure 1: Upper Providence Meetinghouse in Oaks, PA, is a good example of an intact, early 19th-century Friends meetinghouse. Jack E. Boucher, NPS photographer.*

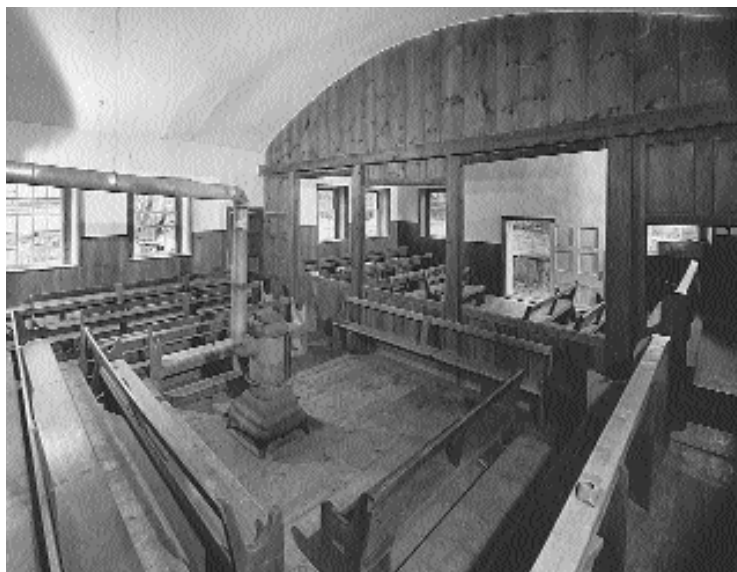


Figure 2:  
Buckingham  
Meetinghouse  
erected in 1768  
in Lahaska, PA,  
was the first of  
its type to be  
built in the  
North American  
colonies. It  
became a pro-  
totype for the  
development of  
the American  
Friends meet-  
inghouse. Jack  
E. Boucher,  
NPS photogra-  
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Penn's Pennsylvania colony became a safe haven for those persecuted for their religious beliefs and home to a unique variety of religious groups. The most influential of these were members of the Society of Friends, the Quakers.

From the founding of the Society in England in 1652 until the passage of the 1689 Act of Toleration, Friends were unable to meet openly and without fear of reprisal. The followers of George Fox, founder of the Quaker movement, were forced to meet in houses, barns, and other buildings adapted for use as meeting places. Prior to the 1690s, only rarely did they attempt to build a structure for the explicit purpose of holding Quaker worship. In search of religious freedom, Friends began immigrating to Pennsylvania in 1681. In this region, religious toleration permitted them the freedom to pursue their beliefs and to develop buildings forms conducive to their silent worship and separate men's and women's business meetings.

#### ***American Meetinghouse Design***

Early Quaker settlers adhered to a pattern for meetings established in England that also informed the plan of their meetinghouses. However, given the liberty to experiment with building design as well as religious practice, the colonial Friends eventually deviated from English patterns to create their own building forms. In so doing, Friends of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting developed a uniquely American meetinghouse that set the standard nationwide for nearly a century (see Figure 2).

Meetinghouse designs continued to evolve over time to adapt to changing patterns of Quaker faith and practice. With this in mind, HABS embarked upon a documentation program to identify and selectively record the meetinghouses of this region and provide the context for their evaluation and interpretation.

The HABS project began with a survey of all Friends meetinghouses within the greater Philadelphia area, which included Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery Counties. The survey identified the essential elements of meetinghouses and, along with preliminary research, recorded historical data such as con-



struction dates, accounts of prior meetinghouses on the site, and monthly/quarterly meeting associations. The information was compiled and examined both chronologically and by region to reveal specific types, periods, and patterns of meetinghouse development. Representative meetinghouse forms were then selected for recording based upon their architectural integrity and ability to exemplify a particular stage in the evolution of Friends' meetinghouse design over more than 300 years.

In the summer of 1997, a field team of architectural technicians working under the direction of HABS architects, the survey historians, and the HABS photographer produced measured drawings, written histories, and large format photographs of six meetinghouses in Pennsylvania, those in the towns of Merion (circa 1695-1714), Radnor (1718), Buckingham (1768), Chichester (1769), Caln (1726, rebuilt 1782), and West Grove (1903). The measured drawings conveyed characteristic features of each meetinghouse and included a floor plan(s), front and side elevations, structure (often documented in a section drawing), and details such as windows, doorways, bench-end profiles, facing benches, and partitions (see Figure 3). Smaller scale elements were also recorded, such as doorway hoods, shutters, hardware, date stones, carved graffiti, and horse mounting blocks.

HABS returned to the field in spring 1999 to expand the scope of the survey. Recognizing that Quaker culture and the influence of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting extended beyond Philadelphia and the surrounding counties, the second phase of the survey included structures built by meetings in other areas of Pennsylvania,

and in Delaware<sup>4</sup> and New Jersey. All together, approximately 150 meetinghouses were examined. With matching funds from the William Penn Foundation, during the summer of 1999 a second team recorded the meetinghouses at Sadsbury (circa 1747), Frankford (1775), Arney's Mount, NJ (1775), Downingtown (1806), Little Egg Harbor, NJ (1863), Germantown (1869), Middletown (remodeled 1888), and Southampton (1969). In an effort to round out the selection, large-format photography and short historical reports were also prepared for 13 other meetinghouses dating from 1708 to 1931.<sup>5</sup>

### Wide Influence

In addition to creating a lasting public record, the HABS study was the first comprehensive examination of Friends meetinghouses historically associated with Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Due to its location at the heart of Penn's colony, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting maintained a powerful influence on Quaker settlements throughout the colonies and the western migrations of Friends to Ohio and Indiana during the first few decades of the 19th century.

Even though the study focused on the Delaware Valley, the study's findings are relevant within a far broader context of Quaker practice and meetinghouse development. Beyond its academic usefulness, the study and sharing of information will enhance public awareness of the his-

torical and architectural value of the meetinghouses and promote their preservation.

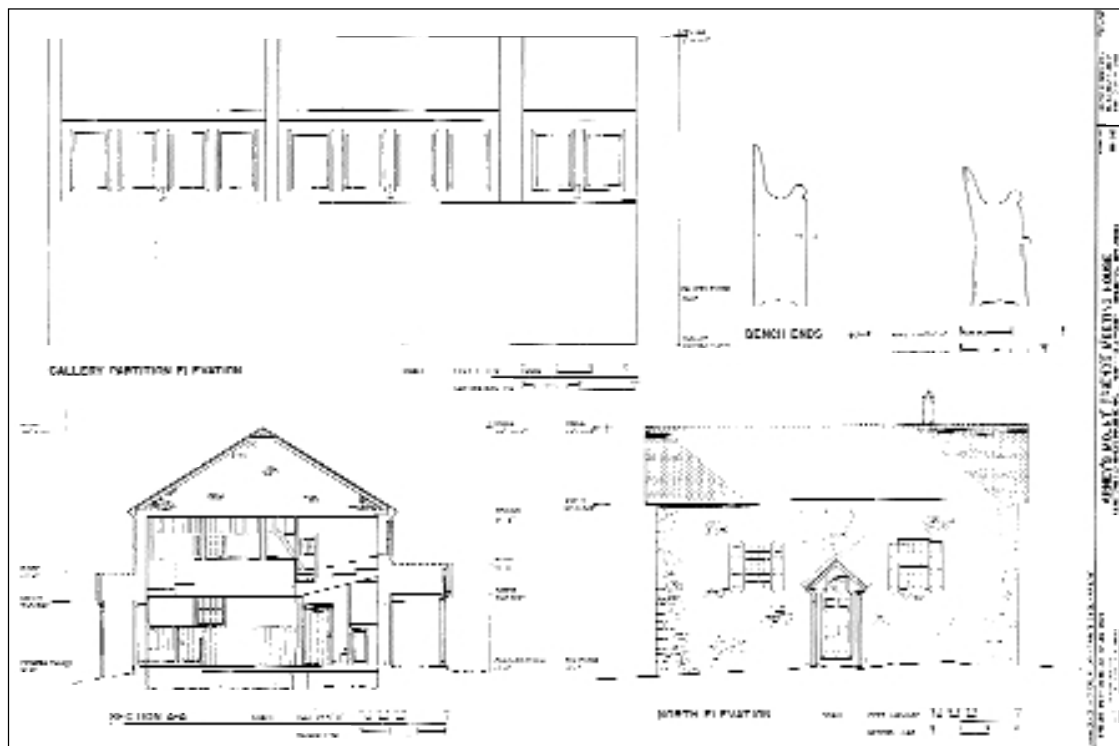
For HABS partners – Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, the Quaker Information Center, The Athenaeum of Philadelphia, and the William Penn Foundation – the project and its culminating exhibition and symposium were opportunities to further the understanding of the role played by Friends in the development of the region's history and architecture.

For the HABS program, the Quaker meetinghouse project was significant because it focused on recording an important vernacular building form. This was a goal of Charles E. Peterson, who founded HABS in 1933, saying:

The [Historic American Buildings] Survey shall cover structures of all types from the smallest utilitarian structures to the largest and most monumental. Buildings of every description are to be included so that a complete picture of the culture of the times as reflected in the building of the period may be put on record.<sup>6</sup>

The genius of Peterson's vision is its all-inclusive outlook. The commonplace vernacular buildings that are a part of everyday life are far more representative of our culture than the exceptional high-style forms. Without them, we risk presenting a skewed perception of our culture to future generations.

Figure 3: This drawing of Arney's Mount Meetinghouse, erected in 1775 in the vicinity of Mt. Holly, NJ, includes an elevation, section, and partition and bench end details. James McGrath, Jr., John P. White, and Kelly Willard, NPS delineators.



The HABS' recording of the Friends meetinghouses of the Delaware Valley is a model for capturing regionally significant vernacular architecture. By identifying a combination of exemplary and representative examples of significant vernacular building forms, a lasting account of these structures and the larger cultural patterns that they reflect can be preserved. From field surveys and contextual studies that examine all forms within a given region, criteria can be developed to target those for more comprehensive and detailed documentation.

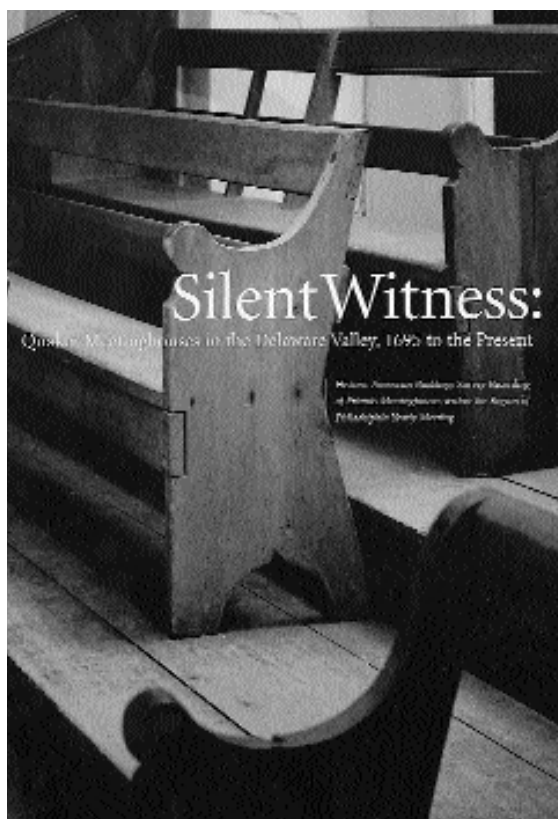
The Friends meetinghouses are significant as important architectural forms and as effective venues for presenting a unique aspect of American history. With the HABS project, their silent story has been given voice.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Philadelphia Yearly Meeting is an event, a faith community, and an organization. The annual meetings are 4-5 day gatherings of the nearly 12,000 Friends among the 104 monthly meetings in the region.
- <sup>2</sup> The meetinghouse is located at 420 Arch Street. Additional exhibitions of *Silent Witness* are planned, but not yet confirmed.

- <sup>3</sup> The material will be deposited with the Library of Congress, which has a longstanding partnership with HABS to maintain and provide public access to the HABS online collections at <www.cr.nps.gov/habshaer/>. The exhibit catalogue may be purchased for \$10 at The Athenaeum or online at <http://quakerbooks.org>.
- <sup>4</sup> Delaware's Friends meetinghouses were not recorded as part of the HABS project because students at the University of Delaware, under the direction of Professor Bernard Herman, have undertaken measured drawings to HABS standards that will be donated to the HABS collection.
- <sup>5</sup> Of the 27 meetinghouses documented, 13 are listed in the National Register of Historic Places: Merion, Plymouth, Radnor, Old Kennett, Bradford, Buckingham, Chichester, Caln, Arch Street, Darby, and Race Street in Pennsylvania and Arney's Mount and Little Egg Harbor in New Jersey. Of these, Merion and Race Street are also National Historic Landmarks; the designation of Buckingham as a National Historic Landmark is pending.
- <sup>6</sup> Historic American Buildings Survey, *HABS Bulletin No. 3* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1933).

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The "Silent Witness: Quaker Meetinghouses in the Delaware Valley, 1695 to the Present," exhibition and symposium was made possible by grants from the Marshall-Reynolds Foundation, the HABS/HAER Foundation, the Thomas H. and Mary Williams Shoemaker Fund, and the following funds of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting: Bequests Funds, the Anna H. and Elizabeth M. Chace Fund, and the Publications Grants Group. The organizing committee included representatives from HABS; the National Park Service's regional office in Philadelphia; Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and its constituent meetings; the Quaker Information Center; Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College; The Quaker Collection, Haverford College; and the Preservation Alliance of Philadelphia. The National Park Service team was led by project managers Robert Arzola, architect, and Catherine C. Lavoie, historian, and included Aaron Wunsch, Virginia Price, and Lavoie who served as historians for the project and conducted the field survey; John White, Roger Miller, and Arzola, who supervised the summer teams of architectural technicians; and Jack E. Boucher and Joseph Elliott, who undertook large-format photography.

Left, cover of the exhibition catalogue.